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ALLIGO.

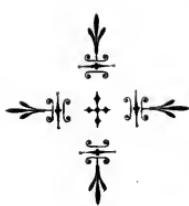
• H + POEM. •

BY

⇒ JAMES + H. + WEST. ⇒

ILLUSTRATED.

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1881.



K A L L I G O.

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By JAMES H. WEST.

THE clay my fingers yearned to mould,
And modeled, as they slowly could,
I find becoming hard and cold,—
 Retaining with the strength of wood
The vines artistically scrolled,
The sculptured ferns and marigold,—
 And having, it is understood,
Of permanence a likelihood.
It may be that another year
Will prove the Age of Marble near.

To the Friends

WHO SO CORDIALLY RECEIVED

MY VOLUME OF 1880,

This Christmas Reminder
of Another Year

IS DEDICATED.

P R O E M .

I SIT in the gloom
Of my evening room
On the hill-top high, and gaze on the tomb
Of darkness which covers earth's beauty and bloom.

O'er the river's gray track
Rise the hill-slopes black,—
Like peddlers, each holding a house for a pack,—
Or like Atlas of old, with the town on their back!

In the Northern sky,
From their throne on high,
Fair meteors flash on the wondering eye,
And fall into darkness, and fail and die:

Fall suddenly down,
With the gleam of a crown,
To fade in the mists and the shadows brown
Which hazily hang over Medford town!

The villagers sleep:
Over valley and steep
Not a household light breaks the darkness deep.—
The pale stars only their vigils keep.

But look! through the night,
(Where a meteor bright
Just vanishing seemed to fall in its flight,)—
There shines in a window a warning light!—

A scintillant glare,
Rich, luminous, rare,—
As if when the meteor vanished in air
It charmed a new star into radiance there!

— O soul of mine!
When the Angel Divine
Shall summon thee swift to a region benign—
Shall summon thee swift, and thou follow his sign,

Thou wouldst not ask more
Than some heart on life's shore
Grow bright with a gleam of thy vanishing lore—
Grow bright with a lustre undreamed of before!

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

THE greater part of the following poem was written a number of years ago. Since that time—owing to other engagements, mercantile and literary, on the part of the writer—it has remained unfinished. Friends who saw the earlier sheets, and who at frequent intervals have evinced a desire for the production in full, have now urged to its completion.

The early date of the composition (when the writer was not twenty years old) will perhaps explain, though it will not excuse, any possible imperfections in the design of the poem and the mechanism of the verses.

A word of comment concerning the facts presented: That he has not overdrawn, in his verses, the social and spiritual needs of a large class of people occupying the southern coastline States of this country,—Florida not only, but the States along the entire Mexican gulf to the extremity of Louisiana,—the writer is confident all observing travelers will admit. Scattered as these people are through vast territories of swamp and forest; living oftentimes for years in solitude; visited by the outside world only by accident, or through the promptings to adventure and travel which urge tourists to their marvelous landscapes; uneducated, uninformed, destitute entirely of re-

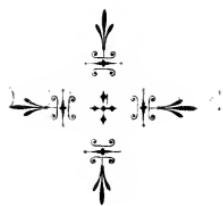
fining influences,—it cannot be that in the simple, innocent, unpolished prayer of the Cracker the writer has overdrawn facts, or that in any part of the story which he has weaved to accompany his scenic descriptions, he has exceeded the license of fiction—except, it may be, as Truth itself is said often to exceed the daring of the imagination.

If what he has written shall perhaps at any time inspire to personal or missionary endeavor in behalf of the numbers of whom he has spoken, he will not have written in vain. And if the descriptions contained in the poem shall warm the hearts of his untraveled readers to a conception of the marvels of Floridan landscapes, as the writer's study in preparing for his task, and his frequent scenic plagiarism in carrying out the same, has warmed his own, he will be a second time gratified.

And so he leaves the poem with his friends, and bids them
“Merry Christmas.”

COLLEGE HILL, Christmas, 1881.

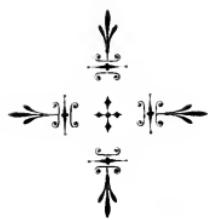
K A L L I G O.





"The hut, like the owner, was tottering fast."

— *Page 19.*



KALLIGO.

I. PRELUDE.

IN that wonderful land of the river St. John's,
First known to the Spanish Hidalgos and Dons
Who followed Leone to its flowery coast
In search of new wealth and perpetual youth,
Lie hid in its forests of tropical growth
Full many a marvel and many a boast.

But not Ocklawaha, that marvelous stream
Whose verduous banks seem the breath of a dream,
Nor ancient Magnolia's health-haunted spring,

Nor aught of the forest's perennial bloom,
Might furnish a tale of so sombre a gloom
As that which the Floridan cypresses sing.

I stood on the bounds of a mighty morass;
And round me while glimmered the quivering glass
Of the turbulent waters, there came to my ear
A wail for the lost ones it jungles amid,—
A wail for the desolate ones who are hid
In its innermost recesses year upon year.

From Mexico's gulf, to the northernmost strand
Where booms the Atlantic on Floridan sand,
Is heard from the forest its mournful lament.
Rare blossoms may bloom in the middle-land maze,
And sunbeams may dance where the pelican plays,
But naught of its dirge doth the woodland relent.

Perchance in the wilds of the Maranon isle,
Or far in the jungles of Congo or Nile,
Lie phantasies hid which mankind never sees.
But he who would learn of the Floridan's haunt,
Or seek the sonata the cypresses chant,
May hear the weird anthem in every breeze.

II. KALLIGO.

ON the half-submerged edge of the Kalligo Swamp,
Whose tropical gorgeur would rival the pomp
Of ancient Assyria's purple day,
An aged man, in the garb of the poor,
Stood silently kneeling beside the door
Of a hut long ruined and gone to decay.

The silver of seventy besprinkled the hair
Of the Florida Cracker—whose simplified air
Bespoke him of nature as rough and uncouth
As ever a man in the bush may become
When wifeless and childless and lacking a home.
Yet full in his eye shone the fire of truth.

His form was as bent as the gnarled cypress trunk
Which lay at his feet—like a fugitive monk
Escaped from its cloister amid the morass.
His brow to the evening breeze lay bare,
And tremblingly murmuring a prayer
His heart showed clear as a crystal glass.

High over his head, through the cypress boughs
Which stretched o'er the hut where he muttered
his vows,
The on-rushing wind soughe harshly and cold;

And the wild-hanging mosses, thick fluttering down,
So madly and fierce by the storm were blown
That it seemed some terrible tale they told.

The hut, like its owner, was tottering fast:
Through hardly the oncoming gust could it last
If kind should not blow the encompassing gale.
The mammoth-built chimney stood leaning awry:—
Propped up by frail timbers which kept it on high
It soon must succumb should the tempest assail.

A back-ground of forest lent shade to the scene,—
A forest the darkest of forests terrene,
And filled with the noisomest vapors and gloom.
Dead trunks and dry branches swayed sighing in pain,
Enrobed in thick moss as with verdure again;
Enwrapped as in grave-clothes and waiting the
tomb.

The giant palmetto and cypress were there,
O'erhung by wild parasites blossoming fair,
And draped with the trumpet-vine's scarlet ar-
ray.

Here petals of purple convolvulus twined;
There picturesque chaplets of white interjoined,
Grotesque in their glory and gorgeously gay.

On many a marvel which Nature discloses
Man's eye never looks, and the daintiest roses
Bloom wild where his footsteps may never have
stirred.

Here blooming and blushing, forever in prime,
Untouched by decay in a century's time,
Were splendors unknown but to reptile and
bird.

Unseen by man's eye, and untouched by his hand,
Lie treasures unnumbered awaiting command,
If only his heart and his will say the word.
With noble realities life is replete :
But he who may seek them with wandering feet
Shall never earth's best benediction have heard.

III.

WILD, wild, through the forests of Kalligo Swamp
The winds in the thickly-hung foliage romp,
And sigh through the groins and the aisles of
the trees.
The snake-bird and buzzard, the vampire and bat
Whirr frightened from branches where croaking they
sat,
Intermingling their cries with the murmuring
breeze.

The waters roll darkly and sullenly back ;
The deadly-toothed moccasin turns in its track
And spits out its venom at rustling leaves.

The Floridan hermit still kneels at his prayer—
His brow to the evening breeze yet bare,
His accents like rustle of whispering sheaves.

High over his head, through the cypress boughs
Which stretched o'er the hut where he muttered
his vows,

The on-rushing wind soughed harshly and cold ;
And the wild-hanging mosses, thick fluttering down,
So madly and fierce by the storm were blown,
That it seemed some terrible tale they told.

But never a thought to the wind's wild wail
Gave the desolate Cracker. With fervency pale
He poured out his soul in so mystic a prayer,

So mournful and strange, so pathetic and weird,
That a listener hearing would doubt what he heard
As a man would doubt music if heard in the
air.

Like cords on his brow purple veins were dis-
tended ;
Long nervously clinched, till his anthem was ended,
His fingers convulsively, tremblingly, twitched.
Weird chorus the elements wailed to his prayer,
And wildly the paroquet screamed in the air,
Its plumage with gold and with green enriched.

O ye of the cities and sunlight ! whose years
Have a thought for the lost of far hemispheres !
Whose hearts have a throb for earth's desolate
ones ! —

Perchance in the Florida Cracker's lament
Some thought ye may find of increasing content
With temperate skies and less tropical suns.

IV.

“THOU GOD!” Thus the desolate hermit began;—
And call nor entreaty from wearier man
E'er fled from the earth to find voice at the
Throne.

“I fain from my bosom my burden would fling:
But vainly I mourn in my suffering;
And vainly I grope for a Hand in my own!

“Thou knowest that never, for twenty long years,
Has aught of affection found voice in my ears,
Or wife or a friend had a home in my heart.

My Lucy, she fled from her prison of clay
Full twenty long Summers ere dawn of to-day;
And Harry, my oldest, fell dead from his cart.—

“ He drove, down below here, the ferryman’s team,
Transporting such tourists from river to stream
As searched for adventure in swamp and morass.
But one day his horses proved frantic and wild,
And down in the cypress-woods murdered my child
By flinging him fierce on the stone-stubbled grass.

“ Men had told me no likelier lad than my Harry
Was known in the country. They said he could
carry
His head with the highest and noblest if he
Would go with them North to some city or town
Which they mentioned as being a place of renown.—
But Harry, poor boy! to the town preferred *me*.

“They said he was handsome! — Ah, nobody needs
To tell a fond father what he himself heeds
A thousand times better than they — than all
others!

And if he *was* handsome, that wasn’t the whole: —
For Harry was handsome in heart too, and soul!
And nobler to me than most boys to their
mothers.

“Just twenty he was, when they killed him — those
horses!

And tender and trusting as if all the forces
Of Nature for years had been waiting his coming, —
Awaiting his coming, and gladly preparing
Her purest and best, and with him at last sharing
Them all — all the graces she long had been
summing.

“Then Robert—poor Robert! Or dead or alive
I never have heard from him since he was five!

Some vagabond stole him away from me—God!
It killed his poor mother—my Lucy, my wife.
She was weakly before, and this ended her life.
She lingered a year or two—yonder’s her sod.

“If Robert’s alive now, he’s thirty, poor boy!.....
Perhaps it was well for him!.....little of joy
Or of happiness he would have known here with
me!

I hope he’s a man who would scorn to do wrong—
Not thoughtless, and hurried away with the throng.

Perhaps he’s a scholar—a parson, may be!

“I *would* have liked one of my babies to be
Of use in upraising the world a degree!—
His mother and I often talked of it so.

We had heard that a parson was one who in time
Would come to a place they called 'Heaven,' and
‘a clime
Where Love reigned,’ — and we wished our poor
Bobbie might go!

“The parson who chanced at my hovel one day
As down the lagoon he had happened to stray
With friends who were seeking adventure and
mirth,—
That parson, he told of a home in the sky
Where *all*, who were willing, when called on to die
Should find the sweet rest they had ne'er found
on earth.

“He spoke of a Father who cared for us all!
Of One who to earth came poor sinners to call
To a feast which He said should in heaven be
spread.

‘Above in the house of my Father,’ said He,
‘Are mansions unnumbered preparing for thee,
Where ne’er shall be hunger, nor darkness, nor
dread.’

“‘No darkness, no dying, but Infinite Good !’—
So ended the minister. Here in the wood
For seventy-odd years I have lived in the dark !
In the dark, O my God ! for these seventy years,
Encompassed by deaths, doubts, and longings and
fears,—
Nor once in the night met a luminous spark !

“For years at a time I have scarce seen a face.
I have heard in the world there is many a place
Where people are living encompassed by joy.
Here ignorance, blindness, despair abound
Through long generations. If Robert has found
A more sun-lit abode, I thank heaven, poor boy !

“The parson seemed happy. His face, like a dream
Of deepest content, was illumed by a gleam
That must have been shot from the heavenly Day
Of which he was herald—a radiant glow!
But alas! his companions were eager to go,—
They were waiting,—I dared not beseech him
to stay.

“. . . . It was only a day or two back that he
called. . . .
In pain from my hovel to-night I have crawled
To meet him again—for he said he would come!
He knew I was sick—knew perhaps I would die
In a month or two more—and the gleam in his eye
Was as kind as my Bobbie’s would be if at home!

“And I thought, when he stood by my side, and
his hand

Held tenderly over my forehead the band
Which he moistened and folded, all fragrant and
cool—
That he looked as my Bobbie would look in his
place !
And I felt a hot something fall full on my face
As he said ‘though as scarlet’ and ‘whiter than
wool.’

“.... But he ’ll not be in time — I am weaker to-
night....
He said I would meet her again, in the light—
My Lucy!.... and *them*, too, my boys that are
dead!....
The winds bellow hoarsely—the forest-trees crack.
Robert! Robert! come back to your father! come
back!....
O God! what is this that my frenzy has said!

“.....O Father of Love! from thy throne in the
sky!.....

If one so untutored and simple as I
May hope to partake of the joys of thy Home,
I pray that the peace which thy promise has given
May one day be mine in that infinite Heaven
To which thou hast called us in kindness to
come!”

v.

WILD, wild, through the forests of Kalligo Swamp
The winds in the thickly-hung foliage romp,

And sigh through the groins and the aisles of
the trees.

The Florida Cracker still kneels—but his prayer
At last is complete, and his silvery hair
Falls damp on a forehead bowed low to his knees!

The winds bellow hoarsely— the forest-trees crack.
The on-swooping tempest— fierce, furious, black—
With the hermit's last words strikes the frailly-
built hut!

He moves not nor struggles— though low at his
feet

With a crash falls the hut in wild ruin complete.
His eyes on earth's tempests forever are shut.

Away on the wings of the gale blew the dust
Upraised by the wind in the lumber and rust.

And away on the wings of fair spirits outspread,
To the limitless realms of the ocean of air,
Sped the soul of the Cracker— what voice shall
say where?

Sadly, sadly the cypress moaned dirge for the
dead.

VI.

WHEN the sun the next morning, red, lurid, and hot,
Rose flinging a luminous glare on the spot,

The party of tourists who shortly before
Had called at the place, here again had arrived,—
And with them the one whose kind office had shrived
(As it proved) the lone Cracker now dead on the
shore.

Through the swamp wildly rushing, they came as
in haste,

Peering anxiously, wildly about, through the waste.

“O my father! my father!” the minister cried.—
It was Robert! the Cracker’s son Robert in-
deed.....

“O my father!—too late have I come for thy need?
Would God, O my father, for thee I had died!”

In the swamp he had met with a stranger, who
said,—

“ You are Robert. Your father has mourned you
as dead.

When a boy you were stolen away to the North.”
Though the storm had impeded—back, back through
the brake,

Through the swamp, to the hut on the edge of the
lake,

The son hastened quickly. But life had gone
forth.

VII.

WITH the dawn of the morning the tempest had
ceased.

In a plot of fair lawn, with its head to the east,—

Where the sun first should strike when it
rose,—a rude grave
Was dug by the minister's friends for the dead.
And a boat, with sad garlands of cypress o'er-
spread,—
A rude funeral-barge,—bore the corse o'er the
wave;

O'er the wave, through long watery alleys of trees;
Under thick-hanging mosses soft-swung by the
breeze;—

From the storm-shattered hovel where sorrow had
been,
To the low narrow grave roughly dug in the sod;—
To the bosom of earth and the bosom of God.
..... And the son returned North, life anew to
begin.



“O'er the wave, through long watery alleys of trees,
Under thick-hanging mosses soft-swinged by the breeze.”

— *Page 36.*

Life anew to begin,—with a weight in his heart;
With a wail in his ears that would never depart—
A wail as of forests when tempests are nigh,
The murmur of waters in madding unrest,
The wraith-mocking rustle, despairing, unblest,
Of wild-hanging mosses fierce-blown to the sky.

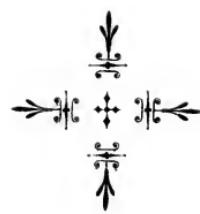
VIII.

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And round me while glimmered the quivering glass
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FINIS.



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